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ABSTRACT

Miami University of Ohio's language program in Luxembourg is described and evaluated. The university's European Center is located in Luxembourg and functions in close cooperation with the parent university. Native Luxembourgers teach the French and German classes with a heavy emphasis on drills using the traditional Dartmouth approach. The Dartmouth approach is preferred because it consistently evokes active responses from the students. In addition, the Dartmouth approach provides a link between classroom experience and outside communication. The major difficulties associated with the Dartmouth approach include extra hours involved in training drill instructors and finding appropriate textbooks. It is concluded that the Dartmouth approach has encouraged students to continue in second language programs. It has helped the exchange students at the European Center profit from the experience of studying abroad. In addition, the opportunity to have contact with peers from another culture has been of great value. (RW)

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Miami University's Language Courses in Luxembourg

Annette H. Tomarken

This paper has a dual purpose: first, it describes the program in language which Miami University of Ohio has developed in Luxembourg. Secondly, it seeks to show how this program's discoveries relate to and can perhaps enhance our more familiar teaching patterns back in the States.

The Miami University European Center was set up about sixteen years ago. The reason for the choice of Luxembourg as a site was closely linked to the university's view of what it wanted to achieve in language for its students. In other words, the university was seeking both a place centrally located in Europe and one which offered day to day access to foreign languages (in the plural). Because of the chosen location, we focus on French and German. Although Luxembourg has a language of its own, the majority of Luxembourgers are fluent in both German and French, not to mention English. However, Miami was not seeking to set up in Luxembourg solely a language program; those we run in a series of summer workshops in France and Italy, as well as in Luxembourg. The year-round program was intended to be open to every student in the university interested in a study abroad experience. The Luxembourgers' linguistic flexibility was therefore an asset, leading us to feel that even the beginning language student would be able to practice comfortably. Similarly, a student with previous experience in either French or German who wished to begin the other language could be sure of the chance to keep up the earlier language in the family situation while learning the new one at the Center until he or she was able to function in it. It is important that these underlying goals be stressed, since most programs abroad focus on intensive language study. For us, a student's language course or courses are but one of many he takes in a given semester in Luxembourg, not the sole object of his

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attentions. The situation there thus remains closer than do most language programs abroad to the rhythm of hours and classes on a normal campus here in the States. Other subjects must be fitted in; the sense of total immersion is not achieved within the walls of the Center.

For these reasons, our language courses in Luxembourg are at the first, second and third year levels, not at the more advanced levels. For the latter group of students we feel it is more appropriate to go directly to the country concerned and study its language in a more intensive fashion. Because we offer these lower level courses, we are able to insist that all students study a language, unless they have already taken the equivalents of what we can offer. Obviously, most students are eager to take such courses in situ, so there is rarely a problem enforcing this rule. Indeed, the fact that from their earliest contact with our office the language requirement is made plain to them in itself serves as a pointer or suggestion to them of part of what their decision to spend a semester or a year abroad entails. It reminds them from the start that this will not be just a travel tour; they will be immersed in a foreign society, living with a foreign family, and they had best begin to prepare themselves psychologically and academically for this new way of life. As a result, some students take a refresher language course before they leave. This preparation is particularly necessary since most of them go as juniors and, not being language majors, have often had little language for at least a year. Depending on their previous level, they would take here a first or second year course, a conversation, pronunciation or composition course to revive their skills.

This preparation of students to go to Luxembourg leads on to a related matter: the coordination between the main campus and the branch campus overseas of actual material covered in language courses. Because students needing to meet a language requirement in their major will have

to go back to courses on the main campus and feel comfortable that they have learned the same basic elements as those who remained in Oxford, we are forced to sacrifice certain freedoms of arrangement and ordering. In addition, about a third of our students return home in the middle of the year, to be replaced by others coming over from Oxford. This mid-year switch complicates matters yet further. We have attempted to solve this difficulty by obtaining from the French and German departments in the States a list of the basic structures learned in each semester of the first and second years. So long as both sides keep one another informed, the system works well.

The next area of concern is the staffing of these courses. We do have one or two full time teachers in Luxembourg from our main campus, but most of our professors are Luxembourgers. Our language professors have usually been Luxembourg based, though not necessarily Luxembourg-born. They are part-timers, having their own full or part-time teaching positions in the local educational establishments--lycées and/or a one-year university. For the most part, their training in language teaching has been rather different from that given in the States. Another level of mediation and integration therefore emerges. Forced to reach certain goals in order that students may feed back into the home system, but concerned also to take full advantage of the European experience and particular skills of the local professors, we must perform a constant juggling act. When my husband and I went over to the Center three years ago to teach in our respective disciplines of English and French, my particular task was to seek to bring the two sides of the Atlantic into closer cooperation so far as language teaching was concerned.

After much discussion in Luxembourg, we decided that we had to do <u>at least</u> all the essential work that was done on campus but that in

addition we should try to develop to a higher degree the oral skills of our students. If they were to live and function in a foreign environment for one or two semesters it was essential that they be given as soon as possible minimal communication techniques. Encouraged by the success of the Dartmouth program introduced in the German department on the main campus a few years ago, we resolved to use some form of drill session as a regular adjunct to the classes and the somewhat limited language lab arrangements available over there. The small size of the student body in Luxembourg meant that in any given year we could only be sure of having student intructors capable of drilling at the first year level. Accordingly, we began with that group.

For the students, the utility of drills was readily apparent in the situation in which they now found themselves. The tensions and anxiety that can at least initially be created in the dramatic and fast-moving situation of a drill class mirrored what they were experiencing quite regularly outside the Center as they sought to travel, eat, and function in a foreign home and environment. In a sense, the mini-situation of the drill class provided them with a trial run for what they would soon be acting out in real life. I was only half joking when I said to them on occasion that it was good if they sometimes felt so familiar with an expression that they were bored in drill class. In that way they could be relatively sure that the expression would not desert them when they needed to come up with it fast in real life. My husband's first visit to Paris had been marred by a taxi-driver's riding away from him in disgust while he sought in his mind to decide if he should use the future, the conditional or the present tense! He ended up walking, too nervous to hail another cab.

The first year's classes went well, and the 102 oral finals at the

end of the year were outstanding. The combination of drills and regular contact with the new language in the course of their travels and daily life seemed to have given confidence even to the least naturally skilled of students. However, we had still not solved the problem of how to bring similar training to the second and third year levels of classes. In any given year we just could not be sure that there would be enough or even any students advanced enough to drill these higher levels. Thanks to the good offices of one of our Luxembourg professors we were able to find a solution to this problem, one which brought us several additional benefits. The local Institut pedagogique agreed to allow some of their students training to be language teachers to run the drills in the second and third year classes. In addition to benefiting from the services of these far more advanced language students, our own students would be able to profit from the experience of teachers close in age to themselves and who lived permanently in the local environment. In other words, instead of being drilled by a peer from within their own group, they would now be meeting someone from another culture but who was not yet a full professor in the sense in which their regular teacher was. Different kinds of contacts would be made, hopefully encouraging exploration outside the classroom. By this time we had become so convinced of the value of the drills that we had made them compulsory for all students and rearranged the entire schedule of the Center so that no student would have a conflict between a drill and another class. This is the arrangement we are currently working with.

Let me now turn to the actual content of the drill hours. In fact, we do not spend a full hour in each session, finding that by the end of a full hour attention flags. Forty-five to fifty minutes seems to be the ideal in terms of sustained intensity and maximum participation. During the

first two years of the adapted program, when we provided only for the first year students, we used orthodox Dartmouth-type drills. A German colleague from the main campus came over and gave a short workshop and information session about the Dartmouth program to the local professors. This series was also open to Luxembourg teachers interested in hearing about the method, and a good number came. Of the student drill instructors, trained by me, a few had previous experience back on campus or, occasionally, in high schools here which use the method. They were an extremely dedicated bunch of people and we had excellent student reactions. Even though the drills were at that time voluntary, attendance was better than 80% and the results were impressive.

Once it had been decided after two years that the worth of the drills was sufficient to justify making them obligatory at all three levels, extra teacher hours were committed to the preparation of both instructors and material. My successor in Luxembourg devoted endless amounts of time to this complicated task, aided by the fact that at last clearly defined hours were set aside for everyone to take and give drills. Previously we had had to juggle classrooms, people, and hours. She and the other language teachers, all local residents, decided in addition to move increasingly outside the classroom with material prepared and practiced in advance. The danger in such situations is of course that only a few may participate, that the academic focus of the class time may be utterly lost in the fascination of being in a real live restaurant as opposed to putting table cloths and candles on classroom tables and pretending one is in a bistro. To maintain the sense of a class, certain goals were set, certain types of questions to be asked and the answers found. Sometimes, the answers were even to be written down as a homework assignment, on other occasions mini-dialogues rehearsed in class were lived out in the cafe, shop, or post

office. In this way the imitation of reality traditionally sought for in the lively quality of a drill session was taken one step further, into a real life situation that still retained a certain structure and in which the nervous beginning student had someone to turn to if he got into difficulties. It is not easy for those in their first semester of language to go out into the world and actually function in that language. With our method, they could at least approximate such an experience and might be emboldened to try it on their own thereafter. This year's sorties include visits to language classes in Luxembourg schools -- perhaps a depressing experience for our students, given that they will probably see seven and eight-year-olds prattling away in German! - but surely a valuable one. They will also go to selected stores, to a wine-tasting, a movie, a concert, a museum, an exhibition, and so on. In all cases they will have had prior training and will be questioned on the results in later classes or drills.

To sum up, I think that our experiment, now into its fourth year, proves that the lifelike quality of Dartmouth or similar types of language drills is of great importance and value to American students. Currently, we are beginning a statistical follow-up to the program, trying to document which students are encouraged by their language experience in Luxembourg to continue with a language back here even though they are not obliged to for their major. Informal collection of data from recently returned students suggests that there may indeed be a significant increase in the number taking further courses in language departments. The drill experience they have had is not of course the only factor in this decision, but it must surely play a significant role, since it helped build the confidence necessary to profit fully from the physical location. In addition to this confirmation of the value of the peripatetic type of drill, the contact with peers from another culture has been of great value, bringing to life

and adding vivid details to their more "academic" previous experience. As they watch Luxembourg students switch languages and roles from one language to another our students are made aware of the increased effectiveness conferred by such skills.

But how can we actually utilize aspects of this type of experience in our more traditional formats and locations back in the States? I would suggest the following as worthwhile directions to pursue. Firstly, such types of firsthand experience can easily be incorporated into summer workshop programs if these are to be taught abroad. The regular long-term link with a local institution and the permanent physical plant from which we are fortunate enough to benefit may not be possible in every case, but a little ingenuity in contacting local universities' language departments, teacher training colleges and so on, often enables one to find teachers or advanced students interested in such an experience. Funding may also be a problem. In our own case, the students both from Miami and from the Luxembourg institute are teaching for credits; the Dartmouth drill hours are a regular course at Miami, entitled Supervised Training for Apprentice Teachers. Those participating earn two credits a semester. Alternatively, some students will become involved simply for the experience; many of my drill instructors told me they had never understood their grammar so well as after trying to communicate it to fellow students. If these two possibilities are unworkable, an hour by hour payment system must be worked out according to local pay rates. Such extra fees must of course be built into the budget of the embryo program.

For those of us teaching solely back here in the States, I feel more and more convinced of the value of the drill format run on Dartmouth lines. If one's chief aim is to learn to speak and communicate in a new language this is surely the most efficient way of doing so. If one's chief aim is

reading and writing, another system may be more appropriate. But for the majority of those who are not language majors, the main interest of a language course, other than fulfilling a requirement in certain cases, must surely lie in its enabling them to speak and communicate with people from another culture, to bridge the barriers that will confront them if they travel abroad. We often pay insufficient attention in practical terms to this underlying motivation, because it is not strictly speaking academic. But if Miami's experience is to be believed, students who begin by enjoying no more than the chance to meet people, travel and get by in a foreign environment often become interested in far more profound matters relating to the foreign culture. The initial pleasure of travel and talking deepens to become a real and informed interest in the psychology, politics, history and so on of the other country.

There are various ways of more closely approximating the foreign experience here. Audio-visual methods naturally have a part to play. The visual element has been shown to be most important in learning, and slides, tapes, and movies can indeed recreate a fair approximation of the feeling of being abroad. I do not advocate sticking solely to Dartmouth-type drills. But we must be sure that these other methods evoke an active response from the students, not mere passive viewing and listening. In addition, we are well advised to turn to those of our non-language departments that have foreign students and investigate the possibility of using some of them as drill instructors. Miami has done this with great success in the German department. Last year, for instance, a young Luxembourger in the MBA program conducted drills for the department and helped with a "German for travelers" course. A couple of years before that, a young architecture student from the Masters' program conducted language drills successfully for two years. Clearly these people must be

closely supervised if state laws regarding teacher competence and certification are not to be infringed. But such supervision is built into the Dartmouth system, since many sections have to be taught exactly the same material in pretty much the same way. Both in Luxembourg and here the drill instructors meet regularly to coordinate their efforts, check details and inquire what they are allowed to tell students as opposed to what they are supposed to leave to the instructors to impart. The criteria for acceptability as instructors have thus primarily to do with their skill at pronouncing, projecting, and dramatizing the material, at making the students feel at ease and ensuring good relationships within the group. They do not draft their own material and should not be expected to do so, even though the native speakers amongst them frequently could. Despite the necessary constraints of such a format, the gain from using native speakers, even though they are not language teachers, is immense. They can bring in local knowledge, props, photos, and news from their countries, immeasurably enlivening the drill situation even though they do not depart from the prescribed material. Their very presence as living, breathing speakers of another tongue and representatives of another culture brings to life the sense of "the other" for our often insular students. It is important not to be put off by the fact that the individuals available are probably not language students; with good training and supervision they can prove excellent instructors.

In conclusion, let me sum up Miami's experience with a modified Dartmouth program in its Luxembourg Center. Despite the usual inevitable hitches due to the novelty of such an approach, the hesitation of professors to change their methods for an as yet unproven alternative, the extra hours involved in training drill instructors and the difficulty of finding the most appropriate textbooks, I believe that our new system has

proved its worth both to the students and the professors involved. In seeking to bridge more fully than do traditional approaches the gap between the classroom experience and the final launching into the real culture of the target language, we have also discovered that such a transition stage stimulates our level and type of student more deeply than do many other approaches. All good teachers seek to imitate the feeling of actually functioning in a foreign language rather than merely parsing out the elements of it as did my husband in the incident described above. But they cannot do it alone; students become too used to their tactics, voices, and techniques. A sudden change of personality, timing or voice can completely disorient them. Traditionally, the language lab is supposed to provide alternative patterns and new voices. I admit with some embarrassment, since I worked a lot with Miami's language lab myself, that the vast majority of students in my experience hate their hours in the lab, whether in Oxford or in Luxembourg. They respond best to situations which get their adrenalin flowing, so to speak, in other words, which most nearly approximate reality in dramatic intensity, content and ordering. Anything we can do to recreate such situations whether here or abroad, will amply repay our efforts. It may be claimed that those of us who are ourselves foreign can fill the same role as the instructors and other arrangements outlined and described above. I do not believe this to be the case. Foreign we may be, but after a while we are not so perceived by our students. Most of us now reside primarily here and for our pupils we belong at least as much to the States and to the administration of our various institutions as to our country of origin. We cannot expect to make the same immediate impact as people here from abroad on a temporary basis. They are coming directly <u>from</u> and usually returning <u>to</u> another land. In a sense, five minutes struggling to converse in a drill

with a foreign peer can create a deeper determination to finally master his or her language than five hours in class with the regular teacher. Let us consider making full use of the lessons Miami learned in Luxembourg.